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OPINION

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The Central Intelligence Agency's troubles

STANSFIELD Turner, director of the United States Central Intelligence Agency under President Carter, was writing in this space last week about the immediate problems of the agency. I want to follow up what he said in that article with the following thoughts.

The CIA and its predecessor, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) of World War II, have seldom had serious difficulties with the Congress or American public opinion over their intelligence-gathering activities. Nor have they had difficulties when their positive covert operations were in support of the armed forces of the US in an open and avowed war.

The OSS operated in support of the regular armed forces in a declared war which happened also to be the biggest and most popular war in the history of the US. Its most serious problem was in convincing some of the generals of the regular armed forces that it could be of help. Gen. Douglas MacArthur refused to have it in his theater. He wanted to run his own show in every respect.

Except for such lack of confidence in its ability to be useful, the OSS had few problems. It was fortunate to be operating in a milieu in which it could hardly do wrong. It was not always successful, but at least its work was aimed against the recognized and official enemy, hence it enjoyed general approval.

The CIA got into its first big problem with Congress and public opinion when it was used both by President Lyndon Johnson and President Richard Nixon for spying on American citizens. When that got out there was real trouble, in part because it was poaching on FBI territory and also because it was a violation of its charter.

It is in further trouble now because it has been conducting such large and dramatic operations against Nicaragua that those operations could not be kept "covert." You simply cannot keep the arming and training of thousands of Nicaraguan rebels out of sight. Nor was it possible to mine the harbors of Nicaragua covertly.

When the scale of "covert" operations passes the limits of what can be kept covert, the operation becomes an act of war. In this case it is war against a government with which the US has formal relations. There is a US embassy in Managua and a Nicaraguan embassy in Washington. Travel between the two countries is open and legal. The US secretary of state, George Shultz, stopped off in Managua last Friday for a talk with leaders of the Nicaraguan government. Nicaragua is a member of the United Nations, where it enjoys much sympathy. Most of America's NATO allies disapprove of the operations against Nicaragua.

The waging of undeclared war is a violation of the Charter of the UN and of scores of other international contracts which were often framed with US help and sometimes at US initiative. Acts of war without a declaration of war are illegal under international law.

The CIA does not go around trying to drum up the kind of business that gets it into the sort of trouble it is in now. Its troubles spring from demands made upon it from other branches of government to do things it ought not to be doing.

A personal friend now retired from the CIA says that during his active service he spent much of his time trying to persuade the State Department and the White House to refrain from asking it to do things it either should not be doing or is not able to do.

Ray Cline, a former deputy director of the CIA, has written that most of its troubles stem from two of its early successes. The first was the overthrow in 1953 of the Mossadegh regime in Iran and the restoration of the Shah. It was done almost literally by one CIA operative going to Tehran with a suitcase of money and buying a street mob.

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